Book club in a Bag

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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Prince of Frogtown

Author: Rick Bragg

Born c. 1959, in Possum Trot, AL; son of Margaret Marie Bragg. Education: Harvard University.
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Name: Rick Bragg
Born: 1959
Education: Harvard University
Address:
University of Alabama,
402-B Phifer Hall,
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Career:
Journalist and memoirist. Worked as reporter for various Alabama newspapers; worked as a reporter for *St. Petersburg Times*, St. Petersburg, FL, and *New York Times,* New York, NY.

Awards:
Nieman fellowship, Harvard University; Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, 1996, for coverage of Oklahoma City bombing; American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award (twice); University of Alabama Clarence Cason Award for Nonfiction Writing, 2004.

Writings:
All Over but the Shoutin', Pantheon (New York, NY), 1997, published as *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, Harville Press (London, England), 1999.
(With Walker Evans) *Wooden Churches: A Celebration,* Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1999.
Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg, University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL), 2000.
Ava's Man, Knopf (New York, NY), 2001.
(Author of foreword) *Best of the Oxford American: Ten Years from the Southern Magazine of Good Writing*, Hill Street Press (Athens, GA), 2002.
I Am a Soldier Too: The Jessica Lynch Story, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.
The Prince of Frogtown, Knopf (New York, NY), 2008.

Media Adaptations:
Ava's Man was recorded on compact disc and released by Random Audio, 2001. *All Over but the Shoutin'* was narrated by Bragg and released as an audiobook produced by Random Audio, 1997.

Sidelights:

In his acclaimed memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg describes his personal journey from harsh childhood to national renown as a prize-winning journalist. A reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, Bragg pays special homage in his memoir to his mother, Margaret, for her heroic efforts to provide her children a good home despite nearly insurmountable hardships.

Bragg grew up in Possum Trot, Alabama, located in the Appalachian foothills on the border between Alabama and Georgia. He was the second of three sons, a fourth having died in infancy. The family was very poor,

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surviving on a fifty-dollar-per-month Social Security check in addition to what Margaret Bragg made as a field hand. Bragg's father, a Korean War veteran who became a physically abusive alcoholic and died at age forty, was rarely present; when he was, he often beat Margaret. She withstood mistreatment stoically and bestowed a compensating love on her children, which enabled Bragg to find eventual success as a writer. All in all, his childhood, Bragg wrote in *All Over but the Shoutin'*, was "full, rich, original and real," as well as "harsh, hard, mean as a damn snake." "I am not a romantic figure," he added, "...but I have not led a humdrum life."

After graduating from high school, Bragg spent six months in college, then landed a job at a local newspaper after the paper's first choice for the job opening decided to remain in a fast-food restaurant position instead. After moving on to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Bragg covered Hurricane Andrew, problems in Haiti, and riots in Miami before spending a year at Harvard University on a Nieman fellowship. Subsequently, he joined the *New York Times*, covering the Susan Smith child murders and the U.S. intervention in Haiti.

In 1996 Bragg's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing earned him the Pulitzer Prize. He brought his mother to New York City by plane for the awards ceremony; she had not only never been on a plane, or on an escalator, or in New York, but she had not bought a new dress in eighteen years. Bragg describes the prize ceremony in *All Over but the Shoutin'* and the scene is, according to Diane Hartman in the Denver Post, "the best in the book." Bragg also memorably recounts his cash purchase, with his prize money and book profits, of a new house for his mother. *Seattle Times* contributor Chris Solomon concluded that *All Over but the Shoutin'* is a "well-received effort to enshrine a saint (his mother), exorcise a demon (his father) and tell his own Horatio Alger story."

Many reviewers have praised Bragg's gripping real-life story, though the enthusiasm has been tempered by some of the story's psychological residue. For Hartman a maudlin tone, born of "survivor's guilt," enters the writing at points—"but Bragg is good and there's no denying it," she concluded. A writer for *Library Journal* recommended *All Over but the Shoutin'* highly for its "honest but unsentimental" style, its "plainspoken and lyrical" effects, and its "telling" details. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor, however, called the book "uneven" and "jolting," referring to it as "a mixture of moving anecdotes and almost masochistic self-analysis" but nonetheless praising Bragg's "gift for language." Similar admiration was expressed by *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Charles McNair, who considered the memoir a "heartbreaking, inspiring account" that "is no sentimental, soft-lens nostalgic piece, but an uncomfortably honest portrait of growing up with less than nothing, a memoir fraught with sharp edges and hard truths."

Bragg's prequel to *All Over but the Shoutin'*, titled *Ava's Man*, is, as he told *Book* writer Anthony DeCurtis, a "necessary response to his readers' righteous demands" after reading *All Over but the Shoutin'*. In this book he tells the story of his maternal grandparents, Ava and Charlie Bundrum. Because he knew few details about the lives of his grandparents, he had to reconstruct the story from an oral history he collected from his mother, aunts and uncles, and other family members and friends. These friends and relatives had rich tales to tell about Charlie Bundrum, a man who was much loved and admired. Bragg had never met his grandfather, as he died the year before Bragg's birth, but he did rely on his own recollections of his grandmother Ava, who lived on thirty-six years after her husband's death.

Charlie Bundrum raised his family in the Deep South during the heart of the economic depression of the 1930s, and moved his wife and eight children twenty-one times, determined to do whatever it took to keep his family fed and safe. Bundrum worked as a roofer and general laborer, as well as a bootlegger, for most of his life. While he developed a taste for the illegal corn liquor, which eventually killed him at a young age, he never let alcohol run his life. Bragg depicts his grandfather, in DeCurtis's words, as "a moonshine maker who worked hard and fiercely protected his family; loved to fight, fish, and tell stories, and cared little for any law but the unspoken, unquestioned code of his community."At one point in Bragg's story, Bundrum gets arrested for vagrancy, based on his appearance, while trying to get home from a fishing trip. This was not an uncommon experience for poor

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white men living in Appalachia during the 1940s. Anthony Day in the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that Bragg is one of the first authors to tell the story of poor whites in the south from an insider's perspective, and noted that Bragg writes "honestly and affectionately" regarding this topic. Robert Morgan, in the *New York Times Book* Review, acknowledged that "relatively few authors have truly caught the voice of the Southern working class," and in *Ava's Man* the characters and setting "grab you from the first sentence." Morgan went on to call *Ava's Man* "a kind of sublime testimonial" and added: "Bragg gets the combination of sentiment and independence and fear in this culture just right."

For Bragg, writing *Ava's Man* was an opportunity to acquaint himself with the grandfather he never knew and to build a monument to this beloved man. Though *Orlando Sentinel* writer John Harper found the book "structurally weak," a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* reported that "Bragg delivers, with deep affection, fierce familial pride, and keen, vivid prose."

In 2003 Bragg was selected by Knopf to write the story of one of the first women to be injured in active duty while serving in the U.S. military. Discussing *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* with *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Charlotte Abbot, Bragg noted that the appeal of writing the book lay primarily in the "wonderful story" Lynch, a soldier fighting in the War on Terror in Iraq, has to tell. "What happened was unexpected: a nineteen-year-old supply clerk was pressed into driving a truck into a war. It was an unscripted drama. Some people died, others got broken. But at least where Jessie is concerned there's a win. I've written so many stories where there wasn't a win...Jessie wanted to see what was 'on the other side of the holler.' These are people who fight and die and serve their country, and they deserve some good attention, something beyond the sneers of intellectuals."

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

Book, September, 2001, Anthony DeCurtis, "Southern Grit," p. 53.
Booklist, September 15, 1997, p. 182; June 1, 2001, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 1795.
Denver Post, October 5, 1997, Diane Hartman, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*.
Entertainment Weekly, November 21, 2003, Tina Jordan, review of *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story,* p. 88.
Geographical, September, 1999, Chris Martin, review of *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, p. 71.
Kliatt, January, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 23.
Library Journal, September 15, 1997, p. 81; January 5, 1998; September 1, 1999, Russell T. Clement, review of *Wooden Churches: A Celebration*, p. 186; November 15, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 115; May 1, 2000, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg*, p. 128; June 15, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 81; September 1, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, "Building Himself a Grandfather," p. 194.
Los Angeles Times, October 12, 2001, Anthony Day, "An Affectionate Portrait of the South's Poor, Hard-Living Whites," p. E3.
Mississippi Quarterly, winter, 1999, Amy E. Weldon, "When Fantasy Meant Survival," p. 89.
New York Times, September 10, 2001, Theodore Rosengarten, "Hammer-Swinging Roofer, Not a Hillbilly, in Appalachia," p. E6.
New York Times Book Review, June 25, 2000, Ruth Bayard Smith, review of *Somebody Told Me*; September 2, 2001, Robert Morgan, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 9.
Orlando Sentinel, September 19, 2001, John Harper, review of *Ava's Man*.
Publishers Weekly, July 14, 1997, p. 73; August 6, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 74; September 8, 2003, Charlotte Abbot, "Bragg: Lynch Has a 'Wonderful Story to Tell,'" p. 16.
Rapport, May, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 39.

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San Francisco Chronicle, September 16, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 68.
Sarasota Herald Tribune, November 5, 2000, Thomas Becnel, "Bragg Shares What Somebody Told Me," p. E5; November 4, 2001, Susan L. Rife, "Bragg's Portrait of Grandfather Is Revealing and Very Human," p. E5.
Seattle Times, October 30, 1997, Chris Solomon, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'.*
Times Literary Supplement, October 16, 1998, Charles McNair, "The Struggle So Far," p. 34.
Washington Post, August 19, 2001, Fred Chappell, "Hardscrabble," p. T4.*

Source Citation: "Rick Bragg." Contemporary Authors Online.

Reviews:

Booklist Review, February 2008
Whereas *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997) provided a tribute to his resilient mother and *Ava's Man* (2001) chronicled his remarkable grandfather, Bragg, an Old World storyteller at heart, now aims his sights squarely at his much-loathed father. In an Appalachian village where bootlegging and brawling took up whatever hours weren't owed to the cotton mill, the Bragg men "drank corn whiskey, played poker, rolled dice and settled arguments with fists and knives and sometimes just acted a little peculiar." Perhaps doomed from the start, his father's life crawls, runs, and staggers from an impoverished and roughshod childhood to a young man's tomcatting golden age to the abuse, neglect, and early death of severe alcoholism. Bragg attempts to reconcile—but not forgive—his father and his legacy as he himself becomes a stepfather to exactly the sort of boy who ought never be a Bragg; who, to his horror, "wept from a boo-boo, or if he was tired." As the boy grows into a man, Bragg transforms into the sort of father he always lacked, and believed he could never be. A deeply felt and painfully honest portrait of folk, family, and fatherhood that will resonate with bittersweet harmony as long as fathers have sons, and sons have fathers.

Library Journal Review, April 2008
With this wrenching story of fathers and sons, Pulitzer Prize winner Bragg completes the personal saga he began with the best sellers *All Over but the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man*. After 40 years of self-proclaimed bachelorhood, Bragg finds himself thrown into the uncomfortable and challenging position of becoming a stepfather. Learning to have a son brings to light the chasm separating Bragg from his own father. Readers are at last allowed to catch a glimpse of this passionate and clearly troubled alcoholic and Korean War veteran, dismissed in the earlier memoirs as a deadbeat villain. Abandoned by his father at age six, Bragg relies on accounts from his mother, brothers, cousins, and family friends to piece together his father's story, riddled with tales of white-whiskey bootlegging, run-ins with local law enforcement, and domestic disputes. Here, Bragg continues in the vein of his legendary storytelling, breathing life into a father he barely knew while learning to love a son. Recommended for public and academic libraries. —Erin E. Dorney, Rochester, NY

School Library Journal Review, July 2008
Adult/High School— Bragg revisits his Alabama hometown for the third time, following *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1998) and *Ava's Man* (2002, both Vintage). He attempts to retell the story of his father, vilified as an abusive drunk in the earlier works, and gives him a more in-depth treatment in an effort to determine what made him the way he was. While by no means sympathetic, the portrayal shows readers a man who had limited choices in education, employment, relationships, and, ultimately, behavior. Before he became an absent father, Charles Bragg was a good son; a handsome man with a sexy car; a fighter and carouser, and eventually a mean, spiteful drunk. Described through recollections of friends and relatives who knew him when, the figure who emerges coped the only way he knew how, with exaggerated machismo, in a small town that he never left for any length of time. The author's realization that he might have been harsh in his previous memoirs comes through as he views his new 10-year-old stepson as soft. Even with all the benefits of education and a Pulitzer Prize, that seed of the immature Bragg tough guy remains. The story unfolds in alternating chapters, shorter ones about the stepson interspersed with longer ones about Charles Bragg. The stepson stories have a '40s-something navel-gazing quality about them that could put off some teens, but most of the book, masterfully told, is the kind of dysfunctional family memoir that teens tend to love. —Jamie Watson, Harford County Public Library, MD

Reviews: (continued)

BookPage Review, June 2008
Paternal instincts: Now a father, Bragg comes to terms with his difficult dad.

When he was a child, growing up dirt-poor in a small Alabama town, Rick Bragg seldom had any coins jingling in his pocket. But even if he had, he would never have spent a penny on a Father's Day card.

As Bragg chronicled so eloquently in his best-selling memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997), his father was a hard-fisted, abusive alcoholic whose lust for whiskey far outweighed any feeling of obligation to his family. When he finally abandoned his wife and three sons, young Rick had scant good memories of Charles Bragg, none of them worthy of a card celebrating fatherhood.

But at age 46, Rick Bragg inherited his own son when the confirmed bachelor surprised himself and everyone else by marrying a tall, red-headed woman, who was "just a little bit slinky." Stumbling into the role of stepfather to a 10-year-old boy not only made Bragg examine his position in this new relationship, it also made him want to learn more about his own father. The result is the third in his series of family memoirs, *The Prince of Frogtown.*

Speaking from his office at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where he is professor of writing (a title he finds quite amusing), Bragg elaborated on his desire to investigate the life of a man he reviled in his first memoir a decade ago.

"I'm older now and having a boy of my own makes me look at things differently," Bragg says. "I did not want to vanish from this world and have people believe that was all he was. As I said in the book, I've written an awful lot about people in prison, and I've written how they're there for their worst moment on earth—because they caught their wife cheating on them, or they saw some ugly look, you know, and they did something that brands them and sums them up forever. But it's not all they are. I guess in a way we were my daddy's worst moment. But it's not all he was, and I wanted to find people who would say something good about him. And I did."

For three years Bragg tracked down his father's friends and the family members who knew him before alcohol turned him into the bitter, brutal man Bragg remembers.

"More than anything, I wanted to write about my daddy as a little boy because I didn't know anything about him. He never said to me, 'When I was a boy, I did this.' I wanted to see what he was like as a 12-year-old, I wanted to see what he was like as a teenager. And now I know."

Although he grew up near Jacksonville, Alabama, the mill town where his father spent most of his life, Bragg felt that to understand the man he needed to know more about the people whose lives depended upon its giant textile factory. Talking to the workers who breathed cotton dust day after day to earn their paltry paychecks made Rick's admiration for them turn into something much deeper.

"People sometimes talk about Southerners and working-class folks, blue-collar folks, with this kind of hokey charm—aren't they quaint? Well, you know, people bled into their machines, they lost pieces of themselves at work, they stood over these machines for 12 hours at a time and did a job that quite frankly, most people just aren't tough enough to do," Bragg says.

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Spotlight on: Prince of Frogtown

Reviews: (continued)

The Prince of Frogtown alternates between two worlds. One chapter explores the father who is gradually becoming a more fully realized person to Bragg. The next examines his own attempts to understand the boy who has become his son. The hardscrabble existence Bragg endured as a child often has him baffled by a 10-year-old who still takes comfort in a "blankey," who demands to be tucked in at night, who wants hugs and hand-holding. But Bragg wasn't just afraid his son might never be "tough enough." As he writes in the book, his fears went deeper.

"I didn't care if he rode bulls or danced ballet, and that's the truth. But what made me crazy was the idea that he was the kind of boy I used to despise, the kind who looked down his nose on the boy I was. That was it, I realized...That was what needled me. My mother cleaned their houses, cooked for them, diapered them. I would not have a boy like that."

But even though this boy was growing up with privileges Bragg couldn't have imagined at that age, he discovered his son has a generous spirit, not a condemning one. "I was worried he might not like my people, or worse than that, he would feel a detachment or separation—which never materialized," Bragg says. "He's a good boy and he's got a good heart and he loves going home to see my people."

Juxtaposing what he learned about his father's life with what Bragg feels are his own shortcomings as a parent doesn't change the countless ways Charles Bragg betrayed his wife and sons. But it does give Rick Bragg a better understanding of the man who died young from three things: bad luck, bad decisions and too much whiskey.

"I didn't try to recreate some daddy for myself in this book—that's the least of the things that happen in it. I just wanted to know who he was as a boy and as a young man, before he fell apart. I don't think that would be too hard for people to understand, to see why I would want that to happen."

Bragg also heard from Jack Andrews, his father's lifelong friend, who contributed what is probably the saddest story in this eloquent, beautifully written and moving book. Right up until the day he died, Charles Bragg continued to talk about how much he loved his wife and boys and how much he regretted the way things turned out. As Bragg writes in *The Prince of Frogtown*, it wasn't enough. But it was more than he had before.

"I wish it had been different, but I cannot see it. I cannot see him living off his pension, or singing a hymn, or lining up to vote. I cannot see him going home to a paid-for house, with pictures of his boys on the wall. And I cannot see her there with him, to make it complete. But now I know he did see it, and that has to be worth something."

Rebecca Bain, formerly the host of the public radio author interview program, "The Fine Print," writes from her home in Nashville.

Reviews: (continued)

Kirkus Review, March 2008
Pulitzer Prize–winner Bragg returns to the rural Alabama home turf of *Ava's Man* (2001) and *All Over But the Shoutin'* (1997) with a double narrative that braids two emotional journeys.A recent marriage and the baggage that came with it—a ten-year-old stepson who still carried around his "blanky"—led the author to revisit the story of his father Charlie, whom he had previously depicted as an improvident, violent drunk who blighted the lives of Bragg's mother and two brothers. Here, extensive interviews with friends and relatives of the "Prince of Frogtown" (the neighborhood where Charlie and his brothers lived and battled in the streets) have produced a more dynamic, if not necessarily nobler portrait. In youth, Charlie drag-raced, swept away his best friend's girl and even stole the keys to the county jail. That was before combat in the Korean War, repeated run-ins with the local sheriff, an increasing taste for alcohol and a TB diagnosis. With considerable discernment, the author traces how his family was formed by a blue-collar town and its hardscrabble past, marked by Indian wars and the Civil War. His native area's cadences, smooth and rich as bourbon, seep naturally into Bragg's prose: Paternal grandfather Bob "never met a man he wouldn't fight at least twice, if insulted, and he intended to slap all the pretty off Handsome Bill Lively's face." Alternating chapters on his unnamed stepson, by contrast, resound more with the annoyance Bragg feels at the start than the love he professes at the end, at which point the author sounds uncomfortably self-congratulatory about the maturation of his stepson, now "the man I rushed him to be."A mixed bag, redeemed by the author's portrait of his father, rendered with rawboned honesty and heartache.

Publishers Weekly Review, March 2008
Bragg *(All Over but the Shoutin')* continues to mine his East Alabama family history for stories, this time focusing on the life of his alcoholic father. Unlike his previous two memoirs, Bragg merges his father's history of severe hardships and simple joys with a tale from the present: his own relationship with his 10-year-old stepson. Bragg crafts flowing sentences that vividly describe the southern Appalachian landscape and ways of life both old and new. The title comes from his father, who grew up in the mill village in Jacksonville, Ala., a dirt-poor neighborhood known as Frogtown, a place where they didn't bother to name the streets, but simply assigned letters. His father's story walks the line between humorous and heartbreaking, mixing tales of tipping over outhouses as a child and stealing an alligator from a roadside show in Florida with the stark tragedies of drunkenness, brawling, dog fighting, chain gangs, meanness and his early death from tuberculosis. Juxtaposed with vignettes about Bragg's stepson, this memoir has great perspective as the reader sees Bragg, the son of a dysfunctional father who grew up very poor, grapple with becoming the father of a modern-day mama's boy. This book, much like his previous two memoirs, is lush with narratives about manhood, fathers and sons, families and the changing face of the rural South.

Guide from ProjectRead

Spotlight on:
Prince of Frogtown

Discussion Questions:

1. How is Rick Bragg's newest book, *The Prince of Frogtown*, similar to his other two books about his family (Pulitzer-prize-winning *All Over But the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man*)? How is it different?

2. Why did Bragg's friend Willie Morris tell him, "You'll never find peace until you write about him (his father). There is no place you can go he will not be?"

3. Why did the Mill advertise only for workers with families? What did the Mill promise workers that signed on? ("good wages, good working conditions, good housing, electricity, free coal")

4. With all that the Mill promised its workers, do you think this would be a good life? What sacrifices did the workers make to incur the "privileges" afforded Mill workers?

5. Bragg mentions that his mother and paternal grandmothers married for love. How did this choice work out for them? Do you think that marrying for love is always the best reason to marry?

6. Why do you think Bragg alternated chapters about "the Boy" with chapters about his father?

7. What do you think caused Charles Bragg to turn into the man he became? Was it his natural inclination, his genetic heritage, his environment, his inability to better himself?

8. Why did Charles Bragg leave the Marines?

9. Do you think that life would have been different for Charles if his family had stayed on with him in Texas? Was Bragg's mother wrong to have gone back to "her mama & her people" back in Alabama after traveling to Texas for a "new start"? After enduring her life with Charles previously, were you shocked she went to Texas in the first place?

10. How did this volume of family memoir stack up with Bragg's other two volumes? Which did you like best? Least? Do you feel like you understand life in a mill town after having read this book?

11. What was your favorite anecdote about the younger Charles?